

Levine, Amy-Jill and Douglas Knight. *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us*. New York: HarperOne, 2011.

Chapter One

Levine and Knight's go to some lengths to ensure that readers of their new volume understand that the history of Ancient Israel is not easily reconstructed. An air of trepidation hovers over this chapter because its authors wish readers to understand that, when it comes to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament what matters most is

... that we value the meaning attached to it by earlier interpreters of the tradition...

rather than

... that [we understand that] an event actually happened (p. 4).

With that caveat in mind and with a brief analysis of the 'maximalist-minimalist' debate of the 1990's under their belt, our authors offer readers a fairly traditional restating of the history of Ancient Israel. The biblical chronology is followed (though it has to be said, this seems to be merely for the sake of making the story outline clear and not as a judgment call on the supposed 'historicity' of the events described in the HB/OT), from Abraham to Hellenism.

One of the best features of this opening chapter is that it's fairly difficult to tell where Knight and Levine stand on the maxi-mini debate. The issues are so evenly described and delineated that it's quite correct to use the phrase 'fair and balanced'!

There is one curiosity that readers will want to note and that is that when the verse numberings differ between the English translations and the Hebrew text, L. and K. annotate the Hebrew versification by the term Tanakh. So, for instance, on page 23 one finds,

(I Kings 4:21; Tanakh 5:1).

instead of the usual (I Kings 4:21; Heb. 5:1).

Beginning students and interested general readers will find L. and K.'s thoroughness most helpful. And they aren't afraid to point out issues that may cause some to stumble. So, in connection with their discussion of the 'Exile and Return' our writers write

The number of persons exiled remains uncertain... Sargon claims to have taken 27,280 in 722. According to 2 Kings 24:14, the Neo-Babylonians exiled a total of 10,000 in 597 alone, whereas Jeremiah 52:28-30 counts a total of 4,600 for all three exiles together (597, 586, and 582). The lower numbers may be more credible, given the types of people likely to be taken into exile (p. 33).

Interestingly they're also willing to tackle one of the most important questions bedeviling both students of the First Testament and historians of Christianity and Judaism- when did the term 'Jew' come to designate '...all who identify themselves with the ethnic and religious trajectory rooted in ancient Israel' (p. 38). Their answer?

The southern Levant remained a part of the Ptolemaic empire for all of the third century BCE. The inhabitants of Judea felt its impact as the Ptolemies, centered in Egypt, drew heavily on them for agricultural products, military conscripts, and slaves. At this time it becomes appropriate to use the term "Jew" to designate all who identify themselves with the ethnic and religious trajectory rooted in ancient Israel (pp. 37-38).

They also recognize that during the Hellenistic period it's best to speak of Judaisms rather than Judaism. And they observe, I think quite importantly,

The history of the Persian and Hellenistic empires is not simply a post-script to the history of Israel, for during these later centuries much of the Hebrew Bible was either written or edited into final form (p. 39).

This may come as a surprise to beginning students of the Bible, but for those who have followed developments in the field, it's now standard fare. The Bible (HB/OT) is most certainly a product of the Hellenistic era.

K. and L. demonstrate that they are on the cutting edge of scholarship when they opine in conclusion

The cultural memory that developed (in the period from 1200 to 150 BCE) was powerful enough to keep its influence alive to this day (p. 41).

The stage is set, now, for an investigation of the literary heritage of Ancient Israel. That's the subject-matter of chapter two, which is up next. If it is as engaging – even for a long time student of Scripture – as the first chapter, it will be a treat as well.

Jim West
Quartz Hill School of Theology